LIVING WITHOUT THE SYSTEM

A Field Guide to Self-Reliant, Cooperative, and Local Alternatives

for the everyday services we've come to pay for

Before You Begin

Not long ago, almost everything on the list that follows was simply how people lived. A neighbor fixed your wiring. A grandmother taught you to make soap. The village oven baked everyone's bread. Somewhere along the way, most of these skills were handed over to companies, and paying for them started to feel like the only option.

This guide is an attempt to put some of that knowledge back within reach. It is organized by the kind of service you'd normally pay for — a haircut, a loan, a school, a taxi ride — and next to each one sits a way to meet that same need through your own hands, your household, or the people around you.

None of this is about rejecting modern life outright, and a few entries here have no true substitute — lab tests, for instance, simply require a doctor. The point is narrower and more useful than that: to notice how much of daily life can still run on skill, cooperation, and what your community already has, rather than on money passing to a distant company.

Every alternative gathered here is free, non-commercial, or achievable without depending on a corporation or a centralized system. Take what's useful, adapt it to where you live, and pass it on — this kind of knowledge was always meant to travel by word of mouth.

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1. Home & Personal Care

Service	Independent Alternative
House cleaning	Doing it yourself, or trading cleaning days with neighbors
Laundry	Hand washing, a pedal-powered washing machine, or a shared neighborhood laundry arrangement
Electrical repairs	Learning basic household wiring, or a neighborhood electrician's cooperative
Plumbing	Simple do-it-yourself fixes, or a local plumbing cooperative
Carpentry	A home workshop, or a shared community carpentry space
Painting	Painting with natural pigments such as clay and lime
Garden care	Permaculture, or a shared community garden
Pet and animal care	Caring for animals yourself, or a local care-swapping network among neighbors
Cooking	Cooking at home, or a cooperative communal kitchen
Childcare	Trading babysitting between families
Elder care	Family care, or a cooperative neighborhood care rota
Haircuts	Cutting your own hair, or a neighborhood barber working for a donation or in trade
Beauty and skincare	Natural home remedies — honey, yogurt, herbs

2. Health

Service	Independent Alternative
Medical checkups	Trusted traditional medicine, or a cooperative clinic staffed by volunteer nurses
Medicine	Home-grown medicinal herbs, or a community pharmacy cooperative
Lab tests	No true substitute exists, though the need for them can be reduced through preventive self-care
Physical therapy	Home exercises, or free group sessions held outdoors

Service	Independent Alternative
Mental health support	Community support circles, or mutual listening among friends
Dental care	Prevention through miswak or activated charcoal, and a non-profit mobile dental clinic
First aid	Self-training from printed manuals, or a volunteer emergency-response team in the village

3. Education

Service	Independent Alternative
Schooling	Homeschooling, or a free cooperative school
Private tutoring	Group study circles, or peer-to-peer teaching
Craft workshops	A local craftsperson who teaches in exchange for a donation or trade
Library access	A little free library, or a book exchange among neighbors
Vocational training	Apprenticeship under a local craftsperson

4. Food & Agriculture

Service	Independent Alternative
Buying vegetables	Home gardening, or a local farmers' market with no middlemen
Buying meat	Raising sheep or cattle at home, or joining a community-supported farm (CSA)
Buying bread	Home baking in a simple clay or electric oven, or a shared village oven
Water supply	Rainwater harvesting, or a shared neighborhood well
Fertilizer	Home composting
Pest control	Companion planting, or natural plant-based repellents
Livestock breeding	Learning breeding methods from experienced herders, or a cooperative herders' network

Service	Independent Alternative
Cheese and dairy making	Home production from farm milk using traditional recipes
Drying fruit and meat	Natural sun-drying on rooftops or in shaded, dry spaces
Extracting vegetable oils	Hand-pressing, or a shared traditional press

5. Traditional Crafts & Trades

Service	Independent Alternative
Pottery	A home pottery workshop using local clay and a simple kiln
Weaving carpets and thread	A home hand-loom, or a women's weaving cooperative
Natural soap making	Homemade soap from oil and ash or lye
Leather tanning	Treating hides with natural methods such as salt and plant tannins
Wax and candle making	From beeswax or rendered animal fat
Sewing and mending	A home sewing machine, mending, and turning old garments into new ones
Shoemaking	Handmade leather sandals, in the tradition of local footwear

6. Housing & Construction

Service	Independent Alternative
Buying a home	Self-building, or joining a housing cooperative
Renting	A shared cooperative housing arrangement
Home maintenance	A collective maintenance team for the building or block
Interior design	Recycling and self-design, such as furniture made from reclaimed wood
Energy	Home solar panels, or a small wind generator
Heating	Rocket-mass heaters, or natural insulation such as straw and wool

Service	Independent Alternative
Cooking without gas or electricity	A clay oven, a wood stove, or an ash-fired stove
Lighting at night	Oil lamps burning olive or sesame oil, or homemade candles
Heating water	A simple solar heater made from a blackened pipe on the roof

7. Money & Finance

Service	Independent Alternative
Banking	A collective savings circle, such as a ROSCA
Loans	Interest-free cooperative loans through a local association
Insurance	A social solidarity fund that members pay into and draw from in hard times
Payments	Bartering, or a local currency such as the Bristol Pound
Savings	A home savings box, or a collective neighborhood savings fund

8. Transportation & Mobility

Service	Independent Alternative
Taxis	A neighborly rideshare arrangement — a lift now, a favor later
Buses	A collective bus run and organized by residents
Car rental	Informal car-sharing among neighbors
Bicycles	Repairing your own bike, or a shared community bike workshop
Freight and hauling	Moving goods by bicycle- or animal-drawn cart
Horse training	Traditional, hands-on training methods without harsh equipment
Transport by animal	Camels, mules, or oxen for travel over rough terrain

9. Culture & Recreation

Service	Independent Alternative
Cinema	Open-air film screenings in the public square with a simple projector
Theater	A community theater troupe
Library	A mobile library carried by bicycle
Sport	Independent physical activity — martial arts, horsemanship, walking, running, and equipment-free strength training
Games	Traditional games such as ball games, hopscotch, and cards, alongside non-addictive, open-source games like 0 A.D. (historical strategy), Minetest (open-world building), and SuperTuxKart (family-friendly racing)
Storytelling	Oral storytelling sessions led by elders, free of books and screens
Children's toys	Toys made from wood, fabric, or recycled materials

10. Faith & Spiritual Life

Service	Independent Alternative
Congregational prayer	A local mosque run and maintained by the community
Religious study	Study circles held in people's homes
Zakat and charity	Giving directly from one person to another in need
Celebrations and events	Community-organized gatherings without commercial vendors

11. Environment & Waste

Service	Independent Alternative
Waste collection	Sorting at home, composting, and manual recycling

Service	Independent Alternative
Reducing plastic use	Replacing it with cloth bags, glass, and bamboo
Neighborhood cleanups	A monthly collective cleaning day
Conserving water	Reusing wash water for irrigation
Purifying water	Boiling, or a home sand or ceramic filter
Household pest control	Repellent herbs such as mint, cloves, and lavender, or natural oils
Washing dishes without chemicals	Wood ash, fine sand, or coconut husks

12. Justice & Conflict Resolution

Service	Independent Alternative
Courts and legal representation	Direct personal negotiation and peaceful understanding, guided by councils of respected elders, without outside intervention or formal legal process
Reconciliation between families	A gathering in a majlis or tent, attended by elders and respected community members
Protecting the vulnerable	A system of social sponsorship carried out by trusted individuals
Preventing disputes	Regular community councils that resolve misunderstandings before they grow

13. Safety & Emergencies

Service	Independent Alternative
Neighborhood watch	A rotating watch shared among residents of a building or block
Emergency response	A trained volunteer team ready for fire and first-aid emergencies
Temporary shelter	A hut built from wood and straw, or a tent made from recycled cloth
Starting a fire without a lighter	A fire bow and friction, or a magnifying glass

Service	Independent Alternative
Navigating in the wild	Reading the stars, the shape of trees, or the flow of water
Treating wounds outdoors	Antiseptic herbs such as yarrow, or natural honey

14. Records & Community Memory

Service	Independent Alternative
Family records	A handwritten family register recording births, marriages, and deaths
Documenting property	A handwritten agreement signed by witnesses and community elders
Preserving local history	Oral storytelling, or a shared village journal kept by the community

15. Wellbeing & Reflection

Service	Independent Alternative
Group meditation	Meditation sessions held outdoors and led by a volunteer
Ecotherapy	Walking in the forest, sitting by a river, tending a therapeutic garden
Therapeutic writing	A paper journal for putting feelings into words

16. Specialty Food Preparation

Service	Independent Alternative
Fermenting food	Home fermentation — pickles, kimchi, sourdough bread — using naturally occurring bacteria
Producing honey and beeswax	Beekeeping in traditional wooden hives
Extracting salt	Evaporating seawater or water from salt lakes

A Closing Word

None of these alternatives require permission, a subscription, or a login. They ask for time, patience, and a willingness to lean on the people nearby — which is, in the end, how communities held themselves together long before any of this needed writing down.

If even a handful of these ideas take root on your street, that's the whole point: fewer things you need to buy, and more you can simply do, share, or grow.